

AUTHENTICITY: SOME POINTS

– Ian Shanahan.

- **What is a performer?** My answer: “an ‘empty vessel’ that resonates the composer’s intentions”. i.e. a **performer’s ego** can be problematic, particularly if it distorts composerly intent.

NB: however, what’s the situation for essentially **improvising** traditions?

- If the above definition is applicable, then isn’t one approaching the music with **respect**, and so with a desire to perform it ‘authentically’ (whatever the culture whence it stems)? Therefore, one needs to...

- immerse oneself in the (sub)cultures of the time [NB: “the best books about music are not about music”!];
- read composers’ writings about their work (and any other texts that relate to their personal extra-musical interests);
- very importantly: read performing musicians’ treatises about contemporary performance practice;
- **analyse** the music itself, in order to uncover internal relationships that might be articulated in performance;
- acquire the specific types of instruments for which the music was conceived: it is almost always desirable to employ these! Replicas of, for example, “early music” (i.e. pre-1800) instruments are often readily available. NB: **tuning** is not necessarily to A440 Hz, or in equal temperament; **scordatura** might be involved, etc.

- NB: most musics across the planet – even those which are notated – expect **improvisatory input** (and/or ‘embellishment’) from the performer. (Exception: most 20th-century art music) So, it is necessary to learn the **style** of improvisation.

- NB: with **notation**, although the same symbol might be used in different pieces and at different times, it’s **meaning** could well be quite different! e.g. + in a lot of Baroque music is a trill-like ornament, but in 20th-century wind music, it means either ‘slap tongue’ or ‘fingerslap’; in string music, + means ‘left-hand pizzicato’.

- Yet **there are inherent problems with the concept of ‘authenticity’**:

- particularly with early music, it is often not possible to identify intentions precisely – despite intense scholarly research. e.g. instrumentation in some Renaissance or Mediaeval music; hemiolas in 16th-century music (where the *tactus* is a minim) [explain!].
- **eth(n)ics**: particularly in **non-Western** musics, a performer might break away from, or extend upon, (rigid) tradition somehow in order to establish a ‘personal authenticity’ or ‘individuality’ – even though other practitioners in the tradition will probably regard their efforts as ‘unauthentic’. (Who is right?) The same issue arises when Westerners appropriate ‘ethnic musics’...
- The process of music-making involves **context** and **audients** (as well as direct participants). True ‘authenticity’ may be precluded because it’s impossible...
 - * *to obtain the necessary instruments* (e.g. a baryton, needed to play some rather obscure works by Haydn, is exceedingly rare);
 - * *to re-create the original context* (e.g. a mediaeval royal banquet; an intimate chamber-music context for a clavichord recital, modern concert venues being far too capacious);
 - * *or to listen with ‘contemporary ears’* (e.g. mass media in the late 20th century has shortened most people’s attention-spans; the rich symbolism of the texts in Cipriano de Rore’s madrigals would, alas, be lost on most Australians; cultural tastes and emphases – such as what is regarded as important (canonical) literature – has radically changed).

- Given that the ‘authenticity movement’ is largely a 20th-century phenomenon, it could be argued that **‘authenticity’ is least problematic in 20th- and 21st-century (art) music!**

- the availability of **recordings** supervised by the composer may clearly reveal their intentions;
- likewise, **detailed prefaces to scores**, and **precise notations and directives** within scores, can clarify composerly intent;
- **the banishment of improvisation and embellishment** in much 20th-century (art) music renders the score a more explicit document.

Even so, the abovementioned problems will still arise (e.g. the rapid rate of so-called obsolescence of synthesizers can make the procurement of a particular model of synthesizer, as called for by a given work, very difficult; this creates interesting performance-practice problems!).

A READING LIST

... Courtesy of Sally Macarthur (*Music and Materials* 2). Her subject outline poses some really good questions:

- “What messages do we receive when we hear something familiar from times gone by?”
- “Are they clearly audible or do we just hear them as a memory trace in their new contexts?”
- “Who benefits from the ideal of musical authenticity in contemporary popular traditions, such as rock music [and in other 20th-century musics]?”

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Schwartz, Elliot and Godfrey, Daniel: *Music Since 1945: Issues, Materials, and Literature*, Schirmer Books, New York, 1993.

Taruskin, Richard: “The Limits of Authenticity: A Discussion”, *Early Music* February 1984.

Taruskin, Richard: “Tradition and authority”, *Early Music* May 1992.

Taruskin, Richard: “The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past”, *Early Music* May 1992.

Watkins, Glenn: “Uses of the Past: A Synthesis”, in *Soundings: Music in the Twentieth Century*, Schirmer Books, London, 1988.

Wicke, Peter: “Revolution: the ideology of rock”, in Rachel Fogg (trans.): *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.

ALSO...

Peres da Costa, Neal: “Lost Traditions and Hidden Meanings: Implications of the Comparison between Written Texts and Early Recordings”, *The Consort: The Journal of the Dolmetsch Foundation* Vol.57 Summer 2001, pp.22-38.

Toop, Richard: “The pit and the pendulum: some reflections on ‘new music’, musicology and current performance practice”, *Musicology Australia* Vol.IX 1986, pp.2-11.